

THE BASICS

Query Letter Clinic



Many great writers ask year after year, “Why is it so hard to get published?” In many cases, these writers have spent years—and possibly thousands of dollars on books and courses—developing their craft. They submit to the appropriate markets, yet rejection is always the end result. The culprit? A weak query letter.

The query letter is often the most important piece of the publishing puzzle. In many cases, it determines whether an editor or agent will even read your manuscript. A good query letter makes a good first impression; a bad query letter earns a swift rejection.

The elements of a query letter

A query letter should sell editors or agents on your idea or convince him to request your finished manuscript. The most effective query letters get into the specifics from the very first line. It’s important to remember that the query is a call to action, not a listing of features and benefits.

In addition to selling your idea or manuscript, a query letter can include information on the availability of photographs or artwork. You can include a working title and projected word count. Depending on the piece, you might also mention whether a sidebar might be appropriate and the type of research you plan to conduct. If appropriate, include a tentative deadline and indicate whether the query is being simultaneously submitted.

Biographical information should be included as well, but don’t overdo it unless your background actually helps sell the article or proves that you’re the only person who could write your proposed piece.

Things to avoid in a query letter

The query letter is not a place to discuss pay rates. This step comes after an editor has agreed to take on your article or book. Besides making an unprofessional impression on an editor, it can also work to your disadvantage in negotiating your fee. If you ask for too much, an editor may not even contact you to see if a lower rate might work. If you ask for too little, you may start an editorial relationship where you are making far less than the normal rate.

You should also avoid rookie mistakes, such as mentioning that your work is copyrighted or including the copyright symbol on your work. While you want to make it clear that you’ve researched the market, avoid using flattery as a technique for selling your work. It often has the opposite effect of what you intend. In addition, don’t hint that you can re-write the piece, as this only leads the editor to think there will be a lot of work involved in shaping up your writing.

Also, never admit several other editors or agents have rejected the query. Always treat your new audience as if they are the first place on your list of submission possibilities.

How to format your query letter

It's OK to break writing rules in a short story or article, but you should follow the rules when it comes to crafting an effective query. Here are guidelines for query writing.

- Use a normal font and typeface, such as Times New Roman and 10- or 12-point type.
- Include your name, address, phone number, e-mail address and Web site, if possible.
- Use a one-inch margin on paper queries.
- Address a specific editor or agent. (Note: The listings in *Writer's Market* provide a contact name for most submissions. It's wise to double-check contact names online or by calling.)
- Limit query letter to one single-spaced page.
- Include self-addressed, stamped envelope or postcard for response with post submissions.
- Use block paragraph format (no indentations).
- Thank the editor for considering your query.

When and how to follow up

Accidents do happen. Queries may not reach your intended reader. Staff changes or interoffice mail snafus may end up with your query letter thrown away. Or the editor may have set your query off to the side for further consideration and forgotten it. Whatever the case may be, there are some basic guidelines you should use for your follow-up communication.

Most importantly, wait until the reported response time, as indicated in *Writer's Market* or their submission guidelines, has elapsed before contacting an editor or agent. Then, you should send a short and polite e-mail describing the original query sent, the date it was sent, and asking if they received it or made a decision regarding its fate.

The importance of remaining polite and businesslike when following up cannot be stressed enough. Making a bad impression on an editor can often have a ripple effect—as that editor may share his or her bad experience with other editors at the magazine or publishing company.

How the clinic works

As mentioned earlier, the query letter is the most important weapon for getting an assignment or a request for your full manuscript. Published writers know how to craft a well-written, hard-hitting query. What follows are eight queries: four are strong; four are not. Detailed comments show what worked and what did not. As you'll see, there is no cut-and-dried "good" query format; every strong query works on its own merit.

Good Nonfiction Magazine Query

Jimmy Boaz, editor
American Organic Farmer's Digest
8336 Old Dirt Road
Macon, GA 00000

My name is only available on our magazine's Web site and on the masthead. So this writer has done her research.

Dear Mr. Boaz,

There are 87 varieties of organic crops grown in the United States, but there's only one farm producing 12 of these—Morganic Corporation.

Here's a story that hasn't been pitched before. I didn't know Morganic was so unique in the market. I'm interested to know more.

Located in the heart of Arkansas, this company spent the past decade providing great organic crops at a competitive price helping them grow into the ninth leading organic farming operation in the country. Along the way, they developed the most unique organic offering in North America.

The author has access to her interview subject, and she displays knowledge of the magazine by pointing out the correct section in which it would run.

As a seasoned writer with access to Richard Banks, the founder and president of Morganic, I propose writing a profile piece on Banks for your Organic Shakers department. After years of reading this riveting column, I believe the time has come to cover Morganic's rise in the organic farming industry.

The piece would run in the normal 800-1,200 word range with photographs available of Banks and Morganic's operation.

While I probably would've assigned this article based off the idea alone, her past credits do help solidify my decision.

I've been published in *Arkansas Farmer's Deluxe*, *Organic Farming Today* and in several newspapers.

Thank you for your consideration of this article. I hope to hear from you soon.

Sincerely,

Jackie Service
34 Good St.
Little Rock, AR 00000
jackie.service9867@email.com

Bad Nonfiction Magazine Query

This is sexist, and it doesn't address any contact specifically. It shows a complete lack of research on the part of the writer.

An over-the-top, bold claim by a writer who does not impress me with his publishing background.

Insults the magazine, and then reassures me he won't charge too much?

While I do assign material from time-to-time, I prefer writers pitch me on their own ideas after studying the magazine.

I'm sure people aren't going to be knocking down his door anytime soon.

Dear Gentlemen,

I'd like to write the next great article you'll ever publish. My writing credits include exposé pieces I've done for local and community newspapers and for my college English classes. I've been writing for years and years.

Your magazine may not be a big one like *Rolling Stone* or *Sports Illustrated*, but I'm willing to write an interview for you anyway. I know you need material, and I need money (but don't worry I won't charge too much).

Just give me some people to interview, and I'll do the best job you've ever read. It will be amazing, and I can re-write the piece for you if you don't agree. I'm willing to re-write 20 times if needed.

You better hurry up and assign me an article though, because I've sent out letters to lots of other magazines, and I'm sure to be filled up to capacity very soon.

Later gents,

Carl Bighead
76 Bad Query Lane
Big City, NY 00000

Good Fiction Magazine Query

Follows the format we established in our guidelines. Being able to follow directions is more important than many writers realize.

Story is in our word count, and the description sounds like the type of story we would consider publishing.

It's flattering to know he reads our magazine. While it won't guarantee publication, it does make me a little more hopeful that the story I'm reading will be a good fit. Also, good to know he's been published before.

I can figure it out, but it's nice to know what other materials were included in the envelope.

Marcus West
88 Piano Drive
Lexington, KY 00000

August 8, 2008

Jeanette Curic, editor
Wonder Stories
45 Noodle Street
Portland, OR 00000

Dear Ms. Curic,

Please consider the following 1,200-word story, "Turning to the Melon," a quirky coming of age story with a little magical realism thrown in the mix.

After reading *Wonder Stories* for years, I think I've finally written something that would fit with your audience. My previous short story credits include *Stunned Fiction Quarterly* and *Faulty Mindbomb*.

Thank you in advance for considering "Turning to the Melon."

Sincerely,

Marcus West
(123) 456-7890
marcusw87452@email.com

Encl: Manuscript and SASE

This letter is not flashy or gimmicky. It just gives me the basics and puts me in the right frame of mind to read the actual story.

Bad Fiction Magazine Query

We do not accept e-mail queries or submissions.

To: curic@wonderstories808.com
Subject: A Towering Epic Fantasy

This is a little too informal.

Hello there.

First off, what did he write? An epic novel or short story? Second, 25,000 words is way over our 1,500-word max.

I've written a great fantasy epic novel short story of about 25,000 words that may be included in your magazine if you so desire.

More than 20 years, I've spent chained to my desk in a basement writing out the greatest story of our time. And it can be yours if you so desire to have it.

I'm lost for words.

Just say the word, and I'll ship it over to you. We can talk money and movie rights after your acceptance. I have big plans for this story, and you can be part of that success.

Money and movie rights? We pay moderate rates and definitely don't get involved in movies.

Yours forever (if you so desire),

I'm sure the writer was just trying to be nice, but this is a little bizarre and kind of a scary stalker ending to the letter. I do not so desire any more contact with "Harry."

Harold
(or Harry for friends)

Good Nonfiction Book Query

Effective subject line. Lets me know exactly what to expect when I open the e-mail.

To: corey@bigbookspublishing.com
Subject: Query: Become a Better Parent in 30 Days

Dear Mr. Corey,

Good lead. Six kids and teaches high school. I already believe her.

As a parent of six and a high school teacher for more than a decade, I know first-hand that being a parent is difficult work. Even harder is being a good parent. My proposed title *Taking Care of Yourself and Your Kids: A 30-day Program to Become a Better Parent While Still Living Your Life* would show how to handle real-life situations and still be a good parent.

Nice title that would fit well with others that we currently offer.

This book has been years in the making, as it follows the outline I've used successfully in my summer seminars I give on the topic to thousands of parents every year. It really works, because past participants contact me constantly to let me know what a difference my classes have made in their lives.

Her platform as a speaker definitely gets my attention.

In addition to marketing and selling *Taking Care of Yourself and Your Kids* at my summer seminars, I would also be able to sell it through my Web site and promote it through my weekly e-newsletter with over 25,000 subscribers. Of course, it would also make a very nice trade title that I think would sell well in bookstores and possibly retail outlets, such as K-Mart, Wal-Mart and Target.

25,000 e-mail subscribers? She must have a very good voice to gather that many readers.

If you would like to look over my proposal, please just shoot an e-mail back.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Marilyn Parent
8647 Query St.
Norman, OK 00000
mparent8647@email.com
www.marilynsbetterparents.com

I was interested after the first paragraph, but every paragraph after made it impossible to not request her proposal.

Bad Nonfiction Book Query

The subject line is so vague, I almost deleted this e-mail as spam without even opening it.

This almost sounds like a sales pitch for a book. Maybe this is spam after all? The reason we don't publish such a book is easy—we don't do hobby titles.

I'm not going to open an attachment from an unknown sender via e-mail, especially of someone who's not the prettiest person. Also, copyrighting your work is the sign of an amateur.

1,000 possible buyers is a small market, and I'm not going to pay a writer to do research on a book proposal.

Not even a last name? Or contact information? At least, I won't feel guilty for not responding.

To: info@bigbookspublishing.com
Subject: a question for you

I really liked this book by Mega Book Publishers called *Build Better Trains in Your Own Backyard*. It was a great book that covered all the basics of model train building. My father and I would read from it together and assemble all the pieces, and it was magical like Christmas all through the year. Why wouldn't you want to publish such a book?

Well, here it is. I've already copyrighted the material for 1999 and can help you promote it if you want to send me on a worldwide book tour. As you can see from my attached digital photo, I'm not the prettiest person, but I am passionate.

There are at least 1,000 model train builders in the United States alone, and there might be even more than that. I haven't done enough research yet, because I don't know if this is an idea that appeals to you. If you give me maybe \$500, I could do that research in a day and get back to you on it.

Anyway, this idea is a good one that brings back lots of memories for me.

Jacob

Good Fiction Book Query

Jeremy Mansfield, editor
 Novels R Us Publishing
 8787 Big Time Street
 New York NY 00000

Dear Mr. Mansfield,

My 62,000-word novel, *Love in April*, is a psychologically complex thriller in the same mold as James Patterson, but with a touch of the supernatural à la Anne Rice.

Supernatural genre bending novels have been money in the bank lately with the emergence of the Anita Blake series and the Highlander series. *Love in April* comes from this same tradition, but like all bestselling fiction makes its own path.

Rebecca Frank is at the top of the modeling world, posing for magazines in exotic locales all over the world and living life to its fullest. Despite all her success, she feels something is missing in her life. Then she runs into Marcus Hunt, a wealthy bachelor with cold blue eyes and an ambiguous past.

Within 24 hours of meeting Marcus, Rebecca's understanding of the world turns upside down, and she finds herself fighting for her life and the love of a man who may not have the ability to return her the favor.

Filled with demons, serial killers, trolls, maniacal clowns and more, this novel will put Rebecca through a gauntlet of trouble and turmoil, leading up to a final climatic realization that may lead to her unraveling.

Love in April should fit in well with your other titles, such as *Bone Dead* and *Carry Me Home*, though it is a unique story. Your Web site mentioned supernatural suspense as a current interest, so I hope this is a good match.

My short fiction has appeared in many mystery magazines, including a prize-winning story in *The Mysterious Oregon Quarterly*. This novel is the first in a series that I'm working on (already half-way through the second).

As stated in your guidelines, I've included the first 30 pages. Thank you for considering *Love in April*.

Sincerely,

Merry Plentiful
 54 Willow Road
 East Lansing MI 00000
 merry865423@email.com

Novel is correct length and has the suspense and supernatural elements we're seeking.

The quick summary sounds like something we would write on the back cover of our paperbacks. That's a good thing, because it identifies the triggers that draw a response out of our readers.

She mentions similar titles we've done and that she's done research on our Web site. She's not afraid to put in a little extra effort.

At the moment, I'm not terribly concerned that this book could become a series, but it is something good to file away in the back of my mind for future use.

Bad Fiction Book Query

Jeremy Mansfield
 Novels R Us Publishing
 8787 Big Time Street
 New York NY 00000

Dear Editor,

My novel has an amazing twist ending that could make it a worldwide phenomenon overnight while you are sleeping. It has spectacular special effects that will probably lead to a multi-million dollar movie deal that will also spawn action figures, lunch boxes, and several other crazy subsidiary rights. I mean, we're talking big-time money here.

I'm not going to share the twist until I have a signed contract that authorizes me to a big bank account, because I don't want to have my idea stolen and used to promote whatever new initiative "The Man" has in mind for media nowadays. But let it be known that you will be rewarded handsomely for taking a chance on me.

Did you know that George Lucas once took a chance on an actor named Harrison Ford by casting him as Han Solo in Star Wars? Look at how that's panned out. Ford went on to become a big actor in the Indiana Jones series, *The Fugitive*, *Blade Runner* and more. It's obvious that you taking a risk on me could play out in the same dramatic results.

I realize you've got to make money, and guess what? I want to make money too. So we're on the same page, you and I. We both want to make money, and we'll stop at nothing to do so.

If you want me to start work on this amazing novel with an incredible twist ending, just send a one-page contract agreeing to pay me a lot of money if we hit it big. No other obligations will apply. If it's a bust, I won't sue you for millions.

Sincerely,

Kenzel Pain
 92 Bad Writer Road
 Austin TX 00000

While I love to hear enthusiasm from a writer about his or her work, this kind of unchecked excitement is worrisome for an editor.

I need to know the twist to make a decision on whether to accept the manuscript. Plus, I'm troubled by the paranoia and emphasis on making a lot of money.

I'm confused. Does he think he's Harrison Ford?

So that's the twist: He hasn't even written it yet. I can't make a decision without a completed manuscript. There's no way I'm going to offer a contract for a novel that hasn't been written by someone with no experience or idea of how the publishing industry works.